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Volunteers 'feel good' nailing down tarps

AmeriCorps helpers stunned by the damage will pitch in for weeks in tornado-ravaged areas.

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Sentinel Staff Writer

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LADY LAKE -- Tornadoes don't often hit her home state of Washington, so Hillary Levine had never seen the awful devastation they can cause.

But Tuesday, the 22-year-old saw homes, trees and entire neighborhoods destroyed by the Feb. 2 twisters.

"It was shocking," Levine said. "It was hard to take it all in."

Now she's pitching in to help victims put their lives back together.

Levine is among 65 eager young volunteers with AmeriCorps that will be in Lake County for the next few weeks to help rebuild communities in Lady Lake and Lake Mack that were racked by the tornadoes.

On Tuesday, Levine and her group picked up debris and nailed blue tarps over homes near Arlington Avenue in Lady Lake. Later this week they will move on to the Lake Mack area, one of the hardest-hit areas in the region.

Started in 1994, AmeriCorps is a network of service organizations whose volunteer members provide help throughout the country -- including tutoring, building affordable housing, cleaning parks and streams and responding to disasters.

Most AmeriCorps volunteers are in their early 20s. Those who complete their months-long service earn \$4,725 to pay for college or graduate school or repay student loans.

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"I'm not doing this for me," Levine said. "These people here [Lake County] need our help, and it's knowing that I can help them is what makes me feel good."

A group of nine AmeriCorps volunteers flew into Lake County on Monday from Alaska.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Justin Katcheak of Stebbins, Ala., when he saw the damage in Lady Lake on Tuesday.

While in Lake County, the AmeriCorps members will eat, sleep and do their laundry at a base camp set up on County Road 473 in Leesburg for volunteers helping with the recovery effort.

Kelly Erjavec, 22, joined AmeriCorps almost two years ago after earning an associate of arts degree and working as a bank teller.

"I like being outdoors, so I soon realized that an office job was not for me," Erjavec said. After AmeriCorps, she hopes to earn a degree in environmental engineering.

Though she is from Minnesota, an area often hit by tornadoes, Erjavec was amazed at the destruction she saw in Lady Lake, where seven people died and 93 homes were destroyed.

"I was shell-shocked," she said. "It was stunning."

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Rob Crawford and Hillary Levine install a tarp on a home on Arlington Avenue in Lady Lake on Tuesday. Dozens of AmeriCorps volunteers picked up debris and helped clean and repair homes that were damaged in the Feb. 2 tornadoes. Levine, from Washington state, called the devastation 'shocking.' (Tom Benitez, Orlando Sentinel)

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